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ABSTRACT

Two teachers of English as a second language composition discuss, in dialogue form, their intuitions about writing and some of the theories of language learning and writing advanced in recent years. Among the topics addressed are the following: self-consciousness; the importance of developing self-confidence in writing; finding a balance between the "what" and the "how" of composition; learning on the right side of the brain; finding or establishing good, nonjudgmental conditions for writing practice; learning to write through free-writing; good teacher intentions that do harm to student writing; getting over the obstacle of the blank first page; finding the potential for growth in composition; sharing and discovery as objectives of writing; and the role of the subconscious. (MSE)

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When Theory and Intuition Meet:

An Approach to Composition Instruction

by
Ali A. Aghbar and Kathy Trump

Preliminary Remarks

This paper, which is the result of long discussions and various professional collaborations between the two of us, intertwines our intuitive insights about writing with some of the theories of language learning and writing that have been advanced in recent years. We have maintained a dialogue format by taking turns in presenting our ideas. The letter A at the beginning of a paragraph signals that Ali Aghbar is talking, while the letter K indicates Kathy Trump's remarks.

The Two Selves

A: As we become adults, we become more self-conscious, which makes it difficult for us to perform certain activities. For example, when I appear in front of an audience to speak or prepare to write for a learned audience, I feel nervous. This is due to certain fears that I experience. I may fear that I might not live up to what the audience expects of me or what I myself would like to produce or that I might make a fool of myself. These and other worries interfere with my performance. I feel much like the divided self described in Gallwey's Inner Tennis.[2] On the one hand, there is the self that performs. On the other hand, there is the criticizing self that constantly reminds me that I am addressing an audience and brings fears to my mind. If I could somehow quiet the criticizing self, I would probably be a much better performer in almost all activities including speaking and writing.

K: The concrete nature of written language seems to heighten fears and can put the criticizing self into overdrive. When we speak, the words are there for a moment and then gone. But the

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written word is there for all to see -- and to judge. Unfortunately, the majority of the writing done by ESL writers is done in judgemental situations with the teacher correcting and grading their work. Someone is usually looking over the students' shoulders as they write, which serves to raise their anxieties to an unproductive level. What needs to be done instead is to subdue the criticizing self so that students can tap into their full potential as writers. Building up the students' confidence in their abilities as writers will go a long way toward achieving this goal. But how do we build up that self-confidence in our students?

Developing Self-Confidence

A: I will explain how I developed self-confidence in writing English, which is a second language to me, but I will first say a few words about my general background in writing. My native tongue is Persian, but I first felt comfortable expressing my thoughts in writing in English. I did not learn to write well in Persian in high school because I did very little writing. I think there were two major reasons for my lack of interest in writing. First of all, I was expected to write flowery introductions and fancy conclusions. It was one thing to write about a topic and quite another to produce highly literary introductions and conclusions. The other thing that kept me from writing was the kind of topics I was asked to write about, topics such as "Love", "Honesty" and "Why knowledge is Better than Money." Here, I was expected to argue like a philosopher when writing about a topic. Had I been asked to write about topics that were familiar to me or were related to things that I had been experiencing, I would have done much better.

In college, I majored in English and during my years as an undergraduate student I did a lot of writing in English. Here, I was not expected to produce those fancy introductions and conclusions and I was given topics with which I was familiar. As a result, I felt at ease expressing myself in English. After some time, I developed a great deal of self-confidence in my ability to write in English. Interestingly enough, this self-confidence helped me feel that I could also write well in Persian, and, with practice, I became a good writer in my native tongue as well.

I see two important aspects to writing: the what of writing, that is, the information to be communicated; and the how of writing, that is, the way to communicate that information. As I was learning to write in English, whenever I had the what of writing, the how of writing did not pose much of a problem to me. My teachers might have taught me rhetorical rules but, when I wrote, I was so involved with getting my thoughts across that I rarely paid attention to those rules.

K: When students have something to say, when the "what of it" is already in their minds, they have an easier time getting words on paper. Writing is communication and students can only write effectively when they have something to say. When they know what it is they want to convey to the reader, the "how of it" is often right there for them. In other words, content will dictate form. The appropriate rhetorical form will seem to grow naturally out of the content. Descriptions, comparisons and persuasive paragraphs will appear in the students' writings because the content will force their appearance.

Learning Via The Right Side of the Brain

A: In more modern cultures, the emphasis has shifted from informal education to formal education: we now feel we must provide rules and special instructions for doing many of the things that, in the past, would have been learned mainly through observation and practice. I once heard Harry Reasoner on the radio talk facetiously about a friend who signed up for intensive courses on how to use household gadgets. He thought that perhaps his friend was a bit of an eccentric because he had once taken a crash course entitled, "You and Your Toaster," but he added that probably the true reason why his friend signed up for the course was the complicated instructions that come with gadgets. He said, "When we buy a new record player, if we play with it for a few minutes, by some magic of the right hemisphere of the brain, we figure out how the thing works, but if we start by reading the instructions we are forever lost." Reasoner concluded by saying, "We are better equipped to do some things than we are to understand how to do them."

I believe Harry Reasoner's conclusion applies to writing as well. I have found that it is much easier to learn to write through writing than it is through being told what I am supposed to do when I write.

K: Just as Harry Reasoner would not suggest that we throw away all instruction manuals, I am not suggesting that we never teach organization and rhetorical forms. What I am saying is that it is more effective to teach these aspects of writing (as well as many others) as they relate to a particular piece of writing the student is working on. Telling a student how to organize a good paragraph and then asking him to write such a paragraph is not as effective as taking a paragraph from the student's writing and showing the student why it is effective or how it can become more effective. Most students will understand and retain an explanation of good paragraph structure better if that explanation is given as teacher and student work together to improve a piece of the student's writing.

Jumping into the Water

A: I developed good writing skills not because I received good instruction on how to write but because I did a great deal of writing. When I was talking about this aspect of writing in Kathy's freshman EFL composition class, one student said that, in his opinion, the best way to learn to write was to read good writers. I agreed with him wholeheartedly, stating that this was particularly important for foreign students who have had little previous exposure to English. However, I added that there was more to learning to write than just having good models. In my opinion, learning to write, much like learning sports, has three requirements: models; instructions; and practice. Let us take swimming as an example. If we want to learn to swim, we need a model; we need to watch good swimmers to see what they do. We also need good instruction. However, if we stop there, we will never learn to swim. I myself have watched good swimmers and can tell beginners what they should do when they are swimming, but I do not know how to swim! To learn to swim, we must also jump into the water and practice. The same thing is true of writing. Good models and good instruction are very important but they alone do not teach one how to write. Good writing is achieved through practice along with exposure to good models and some instruction when necessary.

K: As teachers, we have to set up in our classrooms the right conditions for good writing practice. Let's go back to the swimming analogy. To learn to swim well, swimmers need to spend some practice time in the pool with no instructor present so that they can experiment with their strokes. The same is true of writers. They need to practice writing in non-judgemental situations where they too can experiment, take risks and try out new things. We need to give student writers time, as part of the classroom routine or as homework, to write in a purely practice mode.

How can we give our student writers non-judgemental situations in which to write? Letter writing might be an answer. When I look back on my experiences as a writer in high school and college, I find that writing letters to good friends was the one time that I enjoyed writing and could write without teacher-imposed constraints.

Practicing Writing in Non-Judgemental Situations

A: Letter writing helped me as well. It helped me acquire confidence in my ability to write and gave me a good opportunity to practice writing. I had many American friends and a British friend to whom I wrote letters frequently. This gave me a natural reason to write in English. When I wrote letters, I focused on communicating ideas. Very rarely did I think about what grammatical or rhetorical rules to use. And I knew my friends were not evaluating my writing skills but were rather

responding to the thought content of my letters. They would, from time to time, tell me that I was able to express my thoughts well. This positive feedback about my communicative ability encouraged me to continue writing.

K: Letter writing is one good practice situation for writers. When we write a letter to a good friend, we have the "what of it" and we can experiment a little with the "how of it." But since we can't ask our students to spend a whole semester writing letters to friends, we need to find other ways to give them good practice time. Many ESL teachers have been experiencing a great deal of success with dialog journals. On closer examination, we can see that a dialog journal is a series of friendly letters between students and teacher. The students communicate their ideas to the teacher through the writing in their dialog journals. The teacher then responds to the content of the journal but does not correct or grade the student's work. Content (the "what of writing") is the important aspect of a dialog journal.

Journal writing of any kind seems to give students time to try out their wings as writers, with the criticizing self relegated to a shelf for the time being. Journals can take many forms depending on the teacher, the level of the students, or the nature of the course. For example, students can be asked to respond in writing to an assigned reading, they can respond to a class discussion or the whole class can spend two or three minutes brainstorming ideas for journal entries. Another activity that can stimulate journal writing is to ask students to write about themselves as writers; for instance, they can write about what they liked about the paper they just handed in, what they will do differently next time or how, when and where they revised this paper. Of course, if they wish, they can write about anything that is on their minds. The exact nature of the journal writing doesn't seem to be important, as long as it remains practice writing. Since practice writing is important for what it says, not how it says it, this writing should not be graded or corrected. A journal, whatever form it may take and whatever the teacher chooses to call it, is a wonderful way to give student writers a chance to jump in the water and try their strokes.

Often, probably because of the nature of their previous educational experiences, foreign students don't feel that this free writing is helpful to them. They insist that the teacher correct everything they write.

<u>Learning to Write through Free-writing</u>

A: When I was sharing my thoughts on writing in Kathy's class this spring, one student asked me what I thought of free-writing. I reminded this student that, when he came to the English Language Institute two years before, he spoke English quite

fluently but that his writing was full of all kinds of errors in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. Then I asked him how he had learned to speak in English. He said that he had travelled to England with his family when he had been around ten years old and that he had picked up English through speaking with English children his own age. I asked him if he had made a lot of mistakes at first. He said that he had but that the mistakes had not stopped him. I asked him what would have happened if someone had told him he was not supposed to speak unless he could produce good correct sentences and express his ideas in a well-organized manner. He said he didn't think he could have learned English that way. I told this student that learning to write is very much like learning to speak; we learn to write through writing. Of course, we make a lot of mistakes at first, but through practicing and experimenting with the language, we gradually reach higher stages of writing. Free-writing helps us do this in a non-threatening environment.

K: By helping ESL writers learn to write quickly and freely, with their attention focused on content, we can help them quiet the criticizing self, thus allowing them to tap into their true fluency in English. Free-writing takes the focus off form. This shift in focus will often result in a dramatic increase in students' ability to write. When students write freely, they often write with fewer errors and with more clarity and coherence. The garbled, incomprehensible sentences we are all familiar with will often disappear.

Well-intended Teachers Can Do Harm

A: I have found Kathy's statements to be true in my own experience teaching English as a foreign language. About eight years ago, when I was teaching English at a university in Iran, I had the opportunity to teach the same group of sophomore English students both composition and an introductory course in literature. For the composition class, I marked the students' papers and corrected all their grammatical and rhetorical errors. Then I diligently planned lessons to deal with the students' common errors. Much to my dismay, my efforts produced little improvement in the writing of the poorer students. Their writing continued to be awkward, hard to read, and full of the same errors I had corrected time and time again. However, when I gave essay questions to the same group of students in their literature class, they produced much more fluent and coherent writing. I was not able to understand why that was happening but I think I understand now. For one thing, in the composition class, I was making my students self-conscious by focusing too much on their errors. Instead of helping them to quiet the criticizing self, I was feeding it. Moreover, I think I was giving them topics that were rather esoteric. Finally, I was forcing them to use structures that they were not ready for at

that stage in their development. These conditions were not present when the students were writing essays in their literature class.

K: As Ali discovered while teaching his two classes in Iran, putting the emphasis on form too early in the writing process can have a negative effect.

It is interesting to look at the role of free-writing in the light of Krashen's Monitor Theory. Krashen (1978) concludes that speakers of English as a second language use their Monitor, that is, the body of rules of grammar (and we may add the rules of rhetoric) that have been learned consciously through formal instruction, to self-correct their performance. However, he adds that this is possible only when there is ample time and focus on form; when the emphasis is on communication, the Monitor is barely used. Krashen also distinguishes three kinds of Monitor users: the under-users; the over-users; and the optimal users. Adult students in EFL classes at universities and colleges tend to be overusers of the Monitor. As a result, their writing often sounds contrived and stilted. We have found that free-writing, which shifts the emphasis entirely onto communication, minimizes the use of the Monitor; consequently, the writing thus produced is fluent. Of course, students can use their conscious learning to self-correct when they are editing and revising their work. Thus, by combining free-writing and an opportunity to revise, we encourage our students to use the Monitor optimally; that is, they put the Monitor to rest when they are free-writing and activate it when they are revising and editing. The result is fluent writing with a high degree of accuracy.

Getting over the Hump

A: For me, the toughest stage in writing is the beginning, the stage when we are staring at a blank page and wondering how on earth we are going to begin. I recently shared this experience with an artist who said that, for him, too, the beginning is very tough. He said, "Staring at a blank canvas can be agonizing." We both agreed that our tasks become much easier once we have started and that we sometimes surprise ourselves by producing works that we did not think we were capable of producing.

Having realized that the beginning is an impediment in writing, I have developed a few techniques to overcome it. Sometimes, I tell myself I will write the beginning very fast and then will rewrite it later. This helps me get started and then the task of writing does not seem half as difficult as it did at first. When it is time to rewrite the beginning, I can do that very quickly by making a few changes although I often find that the beginning is fine just the way it is. Another technique I use is skipping the beginning. I start with the body and say to myself that I can always write the beginning

later. Again, this helps me get over that beginning hump. Writing the beginning after I have written the body is not difficult at all and I sometimes realize that the beginning is not really needed anyway.

Where the body is concerned, I try to write what I want to say as fast as I can without agonizing over words, phrases, and sentences. I know that I can always go over my writing and edit it. This not only makes the writing less taxing for me, but it also helps me produce a much more coherent and unified piece of writing than I would if I had to monitor every idea, word, and sentence that I wanted to express.

K: Often we don't know what we are going to say in the body of our writing until we have actually written it. Therefore, writing an introduction before we've written the paper can be very difficult. Writing is a process of discovery. Many published authors say that the text seems to take on a life of its own as they compose. (In fact, I never intended to write this paragraph -- it seemed to appear on my word processor screen as though someone else were writing it.) Because of the discovery nature of writing, asking students to produce a complete, well-formed introduction before they've written the body can be a very frustrating experience for them.

There are many techniques that can be used to help students get started with their writing. One of the best is to ask students to do free-writing or journal writing on a topic before the word "paper" is ever mentioned. If students are to write a paper on any topic, even one as abstract as "Honesty," they should be given several occasions to do practice writing on the topic before the assignment is made. Small group discussions about the topic can help them get started with their journal entries. When they have written several entries about honesty (were you ever dishonest? was someone dishonest to you? did honesty ever pay off for you? what does your religion say about honesty?), the formal assignment can then be made. Small groups are also helpful at this later stage. Students can share their journal entries and help each other decide what parts of their journal writing can be used in their upcoming papers. But the seed has been sown; many ideas are on paper and the students have done a lot of thinking about the topic. They are not facing a blank page.

Unfortunately, when a formal paper is assigned, students often take the straightforward, flowing writing that they have done in their journals and turn it into stilted, convoluted sentences full of important-sounding, but often misused, words. It is sometimes difficult to convince them that a simple style is the best.

Potential for Growth

A: I use a simple, straightforward style in my writing. I remember when I was in college, there was a student who had memorized all the entries in a voluminous English-Persian dictionary. However, when he spoke or wrote, no one knew what he was talking about. I, on the other hand, had a relatively small lexicon and, when I wrote, I used only the words and structures that I knew well or was almost sure how to use. As a result, my teachers often commented that my writing was crystal clear and that it flowed smoothly.

When I shared this experience in Kathy's class, one of her students said, "If we continue using a simple style, when are we ever going to develop good vocabulary and good structure?" I told that student something I have come to believe in recent years: as human beings, we all have a potential for growth, a desire for bettering ourselves. If that potential were not there, we would still be living in caves. But we have left the caves and created civilizations because of that inbuilt desire to aspire for higher things. It is this same desire that moves children to learn language, to walk, and to do thousands of other things; without it, they would stay the same -- crawling on the floor and babbling for the rest of their lives. Adults, too, are moved by the same urge for bettering themselves. However, adults are conscious of this urge and this consciousness, which is a tool in the hands of the criticizing self, sometimes becomes counterproductive as they try to push themselves too far too fast. I told that student that we should continue using a simple style in writing and not worry about improving our vocabulary and structure because that is something which we will do naturally, one step at a time, because of that inherent potential and desire for self-improvement. This is certainly what has happened to me: the simple style I use now is far more advanced than the simple style I used ten years ago.

K: Writing, like any other skill that is acquired over a period of time (the ability to play the piano, to play tennis or soccer, to speak a language), is developmental. We have to start at the bottom and work our way slowly to the top, one step at a time. It is easy to see that a sixth grader is not ready to write an argumentative essay. The necessary skills for writing that kind of an essay come after many years of learning to use the language and of learning about the world. Asking writers to do writing tasks for which they are not yet ready forces them to skip rungs on the developmental ladder and often causes them to fall back a few rungs instead of progressing upwards.

As teachers we recognize the developmental nature of what we do in the composition classroom, but it is easy to feel that we must follow the syllabus or keep up with the curriculum. But, as Ali pointed out, there is a desire in each of us to

progress as far as we can, and given the proper conditions under which to practice their writing skills, student writers will naturally climb the rungs of the ladder; they will learn to write argumentative essays -- when they are ready to do so.

Doing the Impossible

A: I mentioned earlier that writers and artists sometimes surprise themselves by producing works that they never thought they were capable of producing. This happened to me when I wrote my first poem in Persian. When I was in the last year of college in Iran, I was working part-time doing clerical work at a nursing school. One day when I was in the nursing school library, my eyes caught sight of a fetus in a bottle. For a moment, I had a very deep, moving experience. I envisioned myself in that bottle and that fetus sitting in my chair. I decided that I had to write a poem about that experience although I had never written poetry before. I went home and started to write. In about an hour, I had a poem. I was very pleased with it. I ran to school and showed it to some of my friends and they liked it. I showed it to my teacher and he was very pleased and asked me to give him a copy. I finally showed it to a beautiful girl in college and she fell in love with me!

In writing the poem, I had the what of writing; the how of writing it was not all that difficult. What is more, I really surprised myself. On the one hand, as I was writing the poem, other ideas came to me and I was able to relate my experience to my quest for a meaning to life. On the other hand, rhetorical features such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and organization came naturally. I was able to do what my conscious mind would have had me consider impossible.

I have chosen to relate my first experience in writing poetry in my native tongue because of its dramatic nature. However, my observations are not limited to writing in Persian; I continue to surprise myself in a similar manner when I write in English.

K: The first time Ali shared that experience with my freshman composition class I found it hard to contain my excitement because what he was saying validated for my students so much of what I had been telling them during the semester about the nature of writing.

I had been trying to help my students see that writing is usually meant to be shared. As soon as he finished writing his poem, Ali showed it to his friends and his teacher. When we put words on paper, we usually feel the need to share those words with someone. Therefore, we should allow classroom time for students to share their writing. Writing groups in which students can share their writing can be set up at the beginning of the semester. It is important to allow class time for the

students to get to know one another and to feel comfortable with their group members. By sharing their writing, students get feedback from their peers. That feedback should be of a positive nature in the beginning and of a more critical nature when group members have come to trust one another and are ready for criticism. Sharing is a natural consequence of the act of writing and time should be set aside in composition classrooms for that sharing.

The second aspect of writing that Ali confirmed for my students was the role of the sub-conscious in writing. When we open our minds and let words flow, we seem to be tapping into our sub-conscious mind. And this part of the mind often composes sentences that we didn't know we were capable of writing. When we allow our sub-conscious mind to do the work, we do some of our best writing. Putting the conscious mind to rest (turning off the monitor) opens up a flow of language that is often the best language we are capable of producing.

The third aspect of writing that Ali reaffirmed for my class was the discovery nature of writing. Because we make discoveries about ourselves and the world around us as we write, writing is a powerful tool that can be used by anyone, writing in any language, to help the writer better understand himself and his world and the relationship of the two. When Ali wrote his poem, he made some discoveries about himself, and he clarified for himself the experience he had just gone through. He didn't realize the full meaning of that experience until he had written about it. By allowing our students to do some of their writing in non-judgemental situations, we can help them learn to use writing as a tool for understanding. A letter I recently received from a former ESL student showed me that at least one person in my class had come to see the valuable role writing could play in her personal life. She said that in spite of her heavy schedule of classes, she was still able to find time to write in her journal whenever she had a problem. If we allow writing to be the discovery process that it is, students will come to see the power of writing as a clarifier, integrator and explorer of thoughts.

What is good for the students is also good for the teacher. When I give my students time to write in class, I write with them. And I inevitably learn something new about myself, the class or life in general when I do.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have not touched on many aspects of writing; for example, we have not dealt at all with the very important topic of revision. And what we have said certainly will not solve all of the problems of our ESL writers since becoming a competent writer in a second language is a long, difficult process. We have shared some of our thoughts on the nature of

the writing process for ESL students. We have also tried to show how composition instructors can use this knowledge of the writing process to make their classrooms more conducive to good writing. By helping each student tune into his or her own process as a writer, we can help them use that process to their best advantage.

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Kathy Trump is an ESL instructor at the ELI of George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College. She received her masters degree from George Mason University and has taught ESL at all levels both here and in Quebec, Canada.

Notes

1. Kathy Trump is indebted to Dr. Marie Nelson. It was in Dr. Nelson's class at George Mason University that she first learned about the writing process as it relates to ESL writers.

2. Ali Aghbar owes his knowledge of the book Inner Tennis to Earl W. Stevick, who first wrote about its implications in language learning.